Public Health Officers
Of Washington State

May 30, 2002

The Honorable Patty Murray
United State Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Murray:

This country is rapidly developing a crisis situation regarding childhood vaccines. Over the past two years, shortages have developed for vaccines that protect children against measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, chickenpox and pneumococcal disease. The health of our children is being placed at risk by deferral of recommended doses of essential vaccines. The progress that was made over the past decade in improving childhood immunization rates is being eroded.

Vaccination has been repeatedly shown to be among the most effective and cost-effective disease prevention tools that we have in medicine and public health. We strongly believe that you must make it one of your highest priorities to ensure a reliable supply of vaccines to protect our children from diseases that continue to cause millions of deaths elsewhere in the world and could do so again in our country as well.

Behind this impending crisis are economic forces and a fragile vaccine manufacturing system that is increasingly concentrated in a small number of private companies. Since 1967, the number of companies in the U.S. producing vaccines has fallen from 26 to only 12. Moreover, several essential childhood vaccines are produced by a single manufacturer in the U.S.   Because of the current shortages and deferrals, immunization schedules are being disrupted and many children will never be fully immunized. We are aware of the Congressional GAO study of the impact of these shortages, which will highlight the nationwide threat to our children. This is a situation that must be addressed and we believe solutions can come only from the national level.

As public health officers in Washington State, we urge you to take leadership measures quickly to address this developing crisis through whatever means are necessary. The health of the children of our nation depends on your action.

Sincerely,

(Names and Titles)